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SUBJECT: TIERRALTA TRIP HIGHLIGHTS CORDOBA SECURITY CONCERNS

REF: BOGOTA 3856

Classified By: Political Counselor John S. Creamer. Reason: 1.4(b,d)

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SUMMARY  
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¶1. (C) An international delegation--including representatives from the OAS Mission in Support of the Peace Process (MAPP/OAS), the U.S. and Canadian Embassies, and Lutheran World Relief--met with community leaders and victims in southern Cordoba, departmental police and military commanders, and human rights groups to discuss security and demobilization concerns. Police Commander Colonel Oscar Atehortua conceded new criminal groups are a serious challenge, but said Cordoba's homicide rate fell in the second half of 2008, after spiking in the first half of the year due to infighting between rival criminal groups. Demobilized who resisted joining new groups were frequently murdered. Victor Negrete of Fundacion Sinu said poverty is the leading cause of violence, with narcotrafficking profits enabling groups to recruit demobilized who could not find legal work. Local communities voiced concern over displacement and a lack of GOC support to investigate past crimes.

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TIERRALTA SECURITY ISSUES LEAD TO DISPLACEMENT, CONCERN OVER IMPUNITY  
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¶2. (SBU) An international delegation, consisting of representatives from the OAS Verification Mission (MAPP/OAS), the U.S. and Canadian Embassies, and Lutheran World Relief, met December 9-10 with community leaders and victims in Tierralta in southern Cordoba. The victims, including religious leaders and individuals who have displaced as many as three times due to paramilitary and new group violence, said the GOC failed to fill the security vacuum created by the demobilization of the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC) in 2005. The result is continuing conflict between Daniel Rendon's (Don Mario) narcotrafficking group and their rivals--Los Paisas--over control of drug routes and coca cultivation.

¶3. (SBU) Community leaders said they have little faith in local institutions. They claimed that at best, the police are helpless to act against the groups. At worst, the police openly collude with the groups in exchange for profits. The leaders said their main security threat comes from narcotics groups that use re-armed demobilized paras as foot soldiers. The community has not denounced recent threats due to fears of forced disappearance and the apparent lack of any judicial

investigation of past crimes. They also complained about lack of access to GOC social support programs, such as Accion Social, and said the GOC does not provide displacement assistance.

¶4. (SBU) In contrast, Tierralta Mayor Anibal Ortiz said Tierralta is in a "post-conflict" stage. He conceded that fear exists, but said the police are focused on the new threats and have regained the trust of local residents. Ortiz cited statistics showing that violence has fallen recently. Narcotics groups are a legitimate threat, but they mainly target each other--not civilians. He said the FARC remains a threat as well in the municipalities of Montelibano and Puerto Libertador, but not in Tierralta. Ortiz claimed there are only 2-3 families displaced in Tierralta. Lutheran World Relief countered that they knew of at least 200 displaced individuals in Tierralta who continue to live in a church and school. Ortiz asserted that these are not displaced individuals, but rather locals trying to milk the system for more money. Evidence presented by community and Lutheran World Relief disputed the mayor's argument.

¶5. (SBU) The delegation also met with Victor Negrete of the Fundacion Sinu who reviewed land and poverty issues in Cordoba. Negrete said control of land is a crucial factor in the conflict, with 6% of ranchers owning over 50% of Cordoba's land. On the other hand, 75% of small farmers control only 15% of the land. Ranchers pay day laborers between 5-10 thousand pesos (\$2.50 - 5 dollars) for 12 hours of field work, while criminal groups pay much more. Negrete said of the 3800 demobilized in the region, only 2133 work. Of those, 70% work in informal or illegal activity. He also said that 541 have not participated in GOC reintegration programs since 2005. Negrete said that without land reform, high poverty rates would continue to fuel violence and the emergence of new criminal groups.

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POLICE SEE RIVAL NARCOTICS GROUPS, INCLUDING FARC, AS KEY CHALLENGE  
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¶6. (C) The delegation met with Cordoba Police Commander Colonel Oscar Atehortua, who highlighted the police fight against new criminal groups as well as the FARC in the South. Atehortua said Cordoba was a center of AUC activity prior to demobilization, but claimed that the ranchers and farmers who had collaborated with the AUC on ideological grounds do not show the same support for the new groups, who focus on narcotrafficking. He said Don Mario's group has clashed with Los Paisas over land, trafficking routes, and recruitment. Both do business with the FARC, even buying coca base from the group to process into cocaine. Atehortua said the police believe Don Mario is stronger in Cordoba than Los Paisas, a change from earlier in the year.

¶7. (C) Atehortua said the homicide rate in Cordoba has dropped in the second half of 2008, but the first part of the year was marred by murders of demobilized who chose not to join new criminal groups or were thought by one group to be working for a rival band. The police have also made key arrests during the year, including 78 members of Don Mario's organization and 87 from Los Paisas. Some of the largest police losses have come against the FARC, primarily while supporting manual eradication in Puerto Libertador and Montelibano. Atehortua said mines are the primary cause of police injuries. Atehortua said relations with 11th Brigade commander Colonel Salgado are good, but added that some military personnel have been involved in crimes and complaints continue.

¶8. (C) Atehortua said the police have confirmed that the Autodefensas Gaitainistas de Colombia (AGC) are a propaganda front for Don Mario (ref). Recent arrests of men under Don Mario's command found them in possession of AGC pamphlets, and the men admitted to posing as AGC members. No violence

has been associated with the fliers or threats that accompanied the AGC's call for work stoppages in the region. Hence, the men will be charged with making threats rather than terrorism.

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11th BRIGADE HESITANT TO DISCUSS SITUATION

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¶ 9. (C) The delegation met with Colonel Essah Narvaez, second in command of the 11th Brigade, who claimed that local communities welcome the military presence in the region. He said the 11th replaced the entire anti-kidnapping unit (GAULA), which was implicated in extrajudicial killings in Sucre, in February, 2008. The unit is currently well respected by the communities, and he has not received a single complaint since the switch. Narvaez said the military has information that the FARC sells base product to the new criminal groups for processing, and added that the brigade has fought against Don Mario and Los Paisas in Montelibano, Puerto Libertador, Juan Jose, Lorica and Rio Verde municipalities. He said there is no Aguilas Negras presence in the region, suggesting that local residents confuse the Aguilas Negras with Don Mario's group or Las Paisas. Narvaez said the police lack sufficient presence in rural areas to combat effectively the new criminal groups.

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MAPP/OAS VIEWS ON DEMOBILIZATION IN CORDOBA

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¶ 10. (C) MAPP/OAS regional representative Daniel Acosta said the threat of new groups fighting over land and narcotics routes was real. Don Mario and Los Paisas cooperate in some areas and while fighting in others, causing displacement and violence. There have been massacres (murders of four or more people in one event) in Montelibano, Tierralta, Puerto Libertador, and Valencia. MAPP/OAS will try to support the locally-sponsored Program of Development and Peace starting in Cordoba (with support from Negrete and the University Sinu in Monteria) but could provide only limited resources to social programs. Acosta said that though progress was made in 2005-2007, in the past year some demobilized returned to violence, harming the fragile confidence that the communities were beginning to build with local government actors. The MAPP/OAS team also continues to have concerns about corruption and extrajudicial killings by the 11th Brigade.

NICHOLS